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ABSTRACT

A study examines the use of Kiswahili as representative of the dynamism of Kenyan society and the degree to which the Kenyan body politic has achieved cohesion. It focuses on a series of urban centers with overlapping spheres of influence, referred to as the urban corridor. The Kenyan situation is viewed through a model provided by chaos theory and its derivative complexity theory. An introductory section explains the relevance of chaos and complexity theories in this context and describes the general demography and language situation of Kenya. The history of the spread of Kiswahili is then chronicled briefly, and current patterns of use are described. The relative positions of English and Kiswahili are also examined, noting factors that affect this relationship. Finally, the state of Kenyan language policy is considered. Contains 12 references. (MSE)

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THE STATE OF A NATION: KISWAHILI, A WINDOW ON KENYA

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The paper examines the presence of Kiswahili as a window on the dynamism of Kenyan society--the degree to which the Kenyan body politic has achieved cohesion. There are two major cultural and relational fault lines--one separating the coast from the central highlands, another separating the central highlands from the west/north west region. A series of urban centers, with overlapping radiuses of influence, from Mombasa to Kisumu cuts across the fault lines and provides for extreme multilingual and multiethnic diversity. Please see a bold line drawn from the southeast to the (slightly north) west of Kenya on the map next page. I will refer to this series of urban centers as the **urban corridor**. I should state here that I will attempt to view the Kenyan situation through the "model" provided by "chaos" theory and its derivative "complexity" theory. The choice of this two pronged model is motivated by the need to see very broad strokes of sociopolitical scenes and how language, any Kenyan language, negotiates its way across the fault lines and through the **urban corridor**. The choice is also motivated by the inadequacy of attempts to explain or predict or prescribe or even inform issues of language policy. There have been some very respectable efforts in this connection. Whiteley (1974), Ohanessian, Ferguson and Polomé (1975), Bender (1976), Teferra (1977), Polomé and Hill (1980), Laitin (1992), Mansour (1993), Mazrui and Shariff (1994), and Bolland (1996) represent the best sociolinguistic descriptions of a diverse array of African countries. In my opinion they fail to demonstrate the direction of "national language" evolution by emphasizing statistics, who speaks what to whom in whose presence, and the worst offender of all, **language policy**--both colonial and post colonial.

A justification of the appropriateness of "chaos" and "complexity" theories is called for at the outset. The former refers to **process** rather than **state**. It refers to **becoming** rather than **being**--something like constant evolvement, constant dynamic. It deals with **disorder**, **fluctuation**, **irregularity**, and **randomness**. In essence than it attempts to see or capture **order** "masquerading" as **randomness** (Gleick, 1987). "Complexity" refers to a holistic system where a large number of pieces are somehow connected and **constantly interacting**. These extensive interactions "allow the system as a whole to undergo **spontaneous self organization**" and perpetuate themselves by **adapting** (Waldrop, 1992). A brief quotation from Waldrop is very telling: "...these complex, self-organizing systems are adaptive, in that they don't just passively respond to events the way a rock might roll around in an earthquake. They Actively try to turn whatever happens to their advantage." (Waldrop, 1992). Implicit in these statements and claims is a degree of independence of circumstances and events from human decision making, hence my earlier discounting of **language policy** per se. A graphic illustration of this is Tanzania's history with reference to Kiswahili--first

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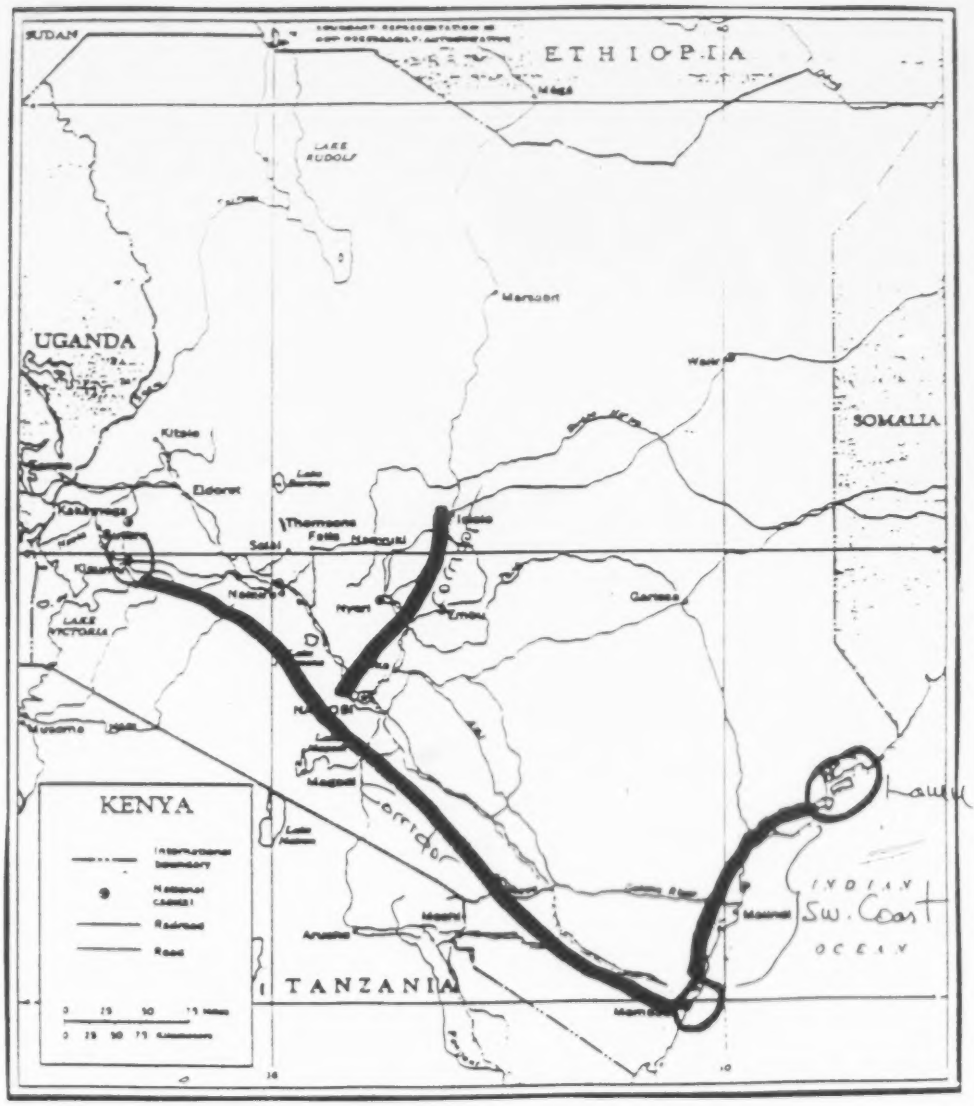

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the Kiswahili language implications of the Maji Maji Revolt (Moyd, 1996), then the colonial German government's decisions, and finally President Nyerere's big bang approach to introducing Kiswahili as the national language. The suggestion here is of course that in spite of very heavy handed efforts in Tanganyika/Tanzania on behalf of Kiswahili, those efforts have had only partial success precisely because other factors have played their roles in exactly the manner proposed/hypothesized by the theoretical models adopted in this paper.

It is in the context of the preceding presentation that I introduce the **urban corridor** as the crux of "complexity" theory, and paradoxically the Kenyan government's language and language education policy as the crux of "chaos" theory. The Kenyan government obliges my claims by **acts of omission** allowing English and Kiswahili, the two languages of historically circumstantial legacy, to compete. A strong pitch could be made for Kikuyu as a legitimate competitor. I believe my hypothesis would accommodate Kikuyu. It would accommodate Dholuo too and any number of languages one would wish to include. I have selected English and Kiswahili only as the two most recognizably prominent. I must admit that Kikuyu presents a slight problem for my hypothesis I have not yet resolved. It will become apparent as the paper progresses.

A certain amount of factual information needs to be given to inform the analysis. A very large portion of the population of Kenya is Bantu speaking; that is to say speakers of languages which belong to the Bantu family of languages. Of these, the largest ethnic/linguistic group is the conglomeration of Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru (KEM). They are grouped together here because they share much in common both linguistically and culturally. They also happen to be geographically adjacent to each other. It is generally accepted that the parameters of their common denominators make them stand out among their neighbors. Together they constitute the dominant cultural and economic unit in the country. The Kikuyu are the largest of this group. The KEM occupy the central highlands of the country extending northwards to Mount Kenya where the Meru predominate. Northwest of this area towards Lake Nyanza (Victoria) is occupied predominantly by the Luo, a Nilotic (non-Bantu speaking) group. Up and down the coast, between the Lamu archipelago in the north to Mombasa in the south is the Swahili coast. This is where the ethnic Swahili predominate. The Waswahili (the Swahili people) are a product of centuries of intermarriage between coastal Africans, primarily the Nyika, and Arab immigrants from Oman and the Yemen (what used to be the Yemen and Aden/Hadhramaut). Their numbers are relatively small, actually very small, compared to the enormity of the impact their language has had on East Africa and beyond.

I have of course oversimplified the human ecology, the demographic spread, and the subtle ethnolinguistic distinctions. I have done so for the same reasons that I have selected only Kiswahili and English, and for the same reasons that I have divided the country into three major geographic domains--the coast, the central highlands, and the west northwest region. These divisions are not unique, they are not exclusive, but each represents a predominance that is valid and uniquely consequential.

Certain demographic factors are significant here. Kenya's population is bunched along the previously mentioned **urban corridor** (Mombasa to Kisumu through Nairobi, Nakuru, and Kericho). There are of course north south stretches of heavy population along this corridor. The most prominent is KEM country northeastwards from Nairobi to Mount Kenya and Meru. The importance of the corridor is the fairly well developed string of urban centers within it. These urban centers are magnets for ethnic and linguistic diversity. Consequently they are eminently receptive to vehicular languages. They each have, as all urban centers do, a radius of influence. The relative multiplicity of such urban centers with overlapping circles of influence within a fairly well defined set of parameters further promotes vehicular languages.

The emergence of Kiswahili is not a new phenomenon. Kiswahili has been spreading out into the interior of East Africa as far as the southern and eastern parts of Zaire (Congo) and other countries adjacent to Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania since pre-colonial days. The first impetus to its spread was through the Arab slave trade. The various colonial powers--the Omanese, the Portuguese, the Germans, and the British--found the presence of Kiswahili as a vehicular language a useful tool for purposes of communication across ethnic lines, for administrative purposes, for the police forces, for the military recruits from among the African population. With the arrival of the Germans and the British came an extraordinary array of missionary activity by various Protestant denominations and Catholic orders. They too found the existing vehicular language, Kiswahili, very useful. The missionaries, were, however, more discrete in their address to the African population. The Bible has been translated into almost every African language. Nevertheless there are clearly many more translations of scriptural text into Kiswahili than of any other African language. In fact the Bible as a whole and individual Books within the Bible have been translated into most Kiswahili dialects. In opposition to Kiswahili, indeed in competition with it and frequently in conflict with it, is (and has been) the colonial language, the language of colonial legacy, English. English under the circumstances had the political advantage but not the advantage of longevity of presence, and not necessarily the economic advantage. This last statement needs qualification. During the colonial period English was the only vehicular language for education, the government, and commerce in the major urban centers. In other words for all activities in which middle class and upward individuals would engage. During the colonial era then English and Kiswahili reflected a class distinction, an economic distinction of sorts, a racial distinction of sorts, and at least on the coast an ethnic distinction.

A relatively small but significant segment of the population very largely urban has had and to a lesser extent continues to have for the most part control over formal retail trade, and perhaps to an even lesser extent middle bureaucracy. I am referring here of course to the "Asian" (individuals from the Indian sub-continent or of such heritage) population. The one distinction made in this context was with reference to Goans--Indians from Goa, the previous Portuguese colony on the West Coast of India. In addition to their own languages, "Asians" are inclined to speak English outside the context of home and immediate exclusive friends. The "Asian" population does speak Kiswahili but not with the same enthusiasm and fluency as

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the various African communities. The numbers of the "Asian" community have slowly declined since independence for a number of reasons. The two most important reasons for the decline have been the unease by this community to commit itself to Kenyan citizenship, and the Kenyan government's slow but steady pressure on them to either integrate (primarily through citizenship) or leave. The latter policy was accomplished mostly through various restrictions imposed on the kinds of businesses in which non-citizens could engage especially in the rural areas.

The relative positions of Kiswahili and English have steadily changed over the last three plus decades. We need to be mindful of the fact that three decades is a short span of time for the topic under consideration. We also need to be mindful of the fact that several new generations of Kenyans have come on the scene without the experience of direct British colonial rule. At the same time, however, an older generation remains and with it the legacy of "Anglophonism" and "Anglophilism". An even stronger factor is the ever presence of large ethnic groups in Kenya with their own heritages and languages. The Luo remain the most problematic of these because they see in Swahili as a prospective national/official language a further increase in Bantu political and economic power. The Kikuyu are another problematic factor. They are geographically positioned in the largest urban center of the country, the capital city of Nairobi, which is right in the middle of the **urban corridor**, and as part of KEM an exclusively dominant group in the other previously mentioned major corridor--Nairobi to Meru.

There are several other factors that contribute to an apparent disorder and fluctuation. **English maintains a strong presence** especially at the secondary school levels and higher education. **Kenyan society remains highly diverse** culturally beyond the broad references presented. A corollary to the preceding statement, **Kenya's cultural diversity entails linguistically irreconcilable distinctions in the Nilotic-Bantu dichotomy.** English benefits from a continual presence in the formal retail trade and middle bureaucracy due to a publicly English speaking Asian population, and its own very significant status as a world lingua franca. **The relentless spread of Kiswahili** in the urban regions, among the lower middle classes and lower. And most crucially **the upward mobility of Kiswahili** among the middle classes.

Entirely unaware of either "chaos" or "complexity" theory but very much aware of the complicated social situation they face, the Kenyan government has by choice, or, to be in concert with the primary hypothesis of this paper, by irrelevance of choice, has remained negligent in pursuing a **language policy**. It is interesting to note that the Kenyan Parliament has often debated the adoption of Kiswahili as the national/official language, and has passed laws to the effect of gradually adopting it as the national/official language. I believe that Ngugi wa Thiongo was imprisoned not so much for his criticism of the government and his views on social justice as for expressing them in Kikuyu. In other words the government would not allow a conscious effort (other than the minimally sanctioned ones) by any entity for any of the languages other than Kiswahili and English. This presents a wrinkle in the smooth flow of my hypothesis based on "chaos" and "complexity".

In closing I wish to reiterate that it is not the impact of these debates and laws, nor is it the personal forcefulness of leadership that will resolve the national/official language issue. Rather it is the constant dynamism of Kenyan circumstances that involves constant interaction, clash if you will, between the prevailing forces--linguistic, cultural, demographic--which will show with increasing clarity **order** "masquerading" as **randomness**. The **urban corridor** provides for these interactions/clashes to allow the "system as a whole to undergo **spontaneous self organization**, and perpetuate themselves by adapting." I would like to suggest that "chaos" shows with increasing clarity the perpetual presence and emergence of English, Kiswahili, Kikuyu, and Dholuo as the major linguistic players. "Complexity" points at **self organization** of these four hierarchically in the following order: Kiswahili, English, Kikuyu, Dholuo. Furthermore, it shows a distancing between Kiswahili and English on the one hand and on the other between English, and Kikuyu and Dholuo. This in turn suggests an increasing isolation of the status of English out of the peculiar circumstances of Kenya and into a closer affinity with its universal status for its raison d'être.

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